

Rt Hon John Prescott MP
Deputy Prime Minister
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
26 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2WH

6 July 2004

**FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNITARY LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN AREAS
PROPOSED FOR POSSIBLE ELECTED REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES**

Dear Deputy Prime Minister

I am writing to you on behalf of The National Council on Archives (NCA). The NCA is a membership organization, which represents a broad spectrum of the archival community including user groups, professionals, national and regional bodies. It aims to provide a single voice for the archival community and to lobby on matters of common interest. The NCA works in partnership with The National Archives, MLA: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, the Society of Archivists and the Association for Chief Archivists in Local Government.

Our comments on the final recommendations are draft proposals are limited to the issues affecting archives, records and public access to them.

Whilst recognising that the needs of such a small specialist service cannot determine the future pattern of local government, we need to raise you awareness of the risks and uncertainties which will arise if the present proposals are enacted, so that steps can be taken to ensure the continuity of effective provision of public services. You will be aware that in preparing their final recommendations on each of the present two-tier areas, the Boundary Committee has received many submissions about archive services from national regional and local organisations. These indicate a higher level of concern and comment on this small specialist service area than was made about much larger sectors such as education or social work, or indeed related areas such as museums or libraries.

The Final Reports for all areas make mention of the need for "authorities, particularly those included in the sub-county option, to work together closely to ensure that specialist expertise is not necessarily broken up and that existing levels of efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of relatively small-scale but important functions such as trading standards, archive provision and records management are maintained". [Appendix B of each report]. NCA would support the apparent implication that there would be little direct impact on most archive services if county level unitaries were the outcome of the process. However we still feel it appropriate to make the following comments, mainly about this section of Appendix B, but also the section of the main report that deals with Joint Arrangements.

Firstly, we are concerned about the linking of archives and records management in the appendix. While the two specialisations are very closely related - and are frequently combined in the same operational unit within local authorities with an archive function - we feel that it would be more appropriate to consider each separately in the context of Local Government Re-organisation. Archive services, which work to preserve historical records permanently and make these available for study, require high cost specialist storage, and staff with skills in cataloguing, conservation and assisting the public in using these documents. The costs of such

operations are high, making it uneconomic to provide such facilities on a localised basis, and historically it has been the County Councils that have provided the majority of such facilities, most usually from one site in each county. In addition many historical records relate to areas much larger than the present local authority areas (which are often smaller than the pre 1974 counties), and taken together these two factors have resulted in the establishment of joint arrangements to provide archive services in virtually every case where unitary authorities were created in the mid 1990s, and at the abolition of several of the metropolitan counties in 1986.

In contrast Records Management is concerned with the recently created records of the local authorities themselves, and is increasingly recognised as an essential component of effective information and Knowledge Management. The imminent full implementation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on 1 January 2005 has highlighted the need for effective Records Management (as recognised by the Lord Chancellor's Guidance on section 46 of the Act), and also the current poor level of provision in many local authorities. NCA urges that it would be more appropriate for Records Management to be viewed as an essential and integral function of all new unitaries which might come into being, whether these are based on existing county level or by the aggregation of several districts.

Our other comments relate specifically to the arrangements for historical archives. NCA is disappointed that the Boundary Committee has not supported a requirement for joint archive arrangements to be set up if the new unitaries are based on sub-county options. While the present arrangements are not perfect, they have in the main been effective in ensuring the continued integrity of collections, and we feel there would be a real risk of fragmentation unless sub-county authorities are subject to a stated requirement to exercise their archive powers jointly.

We also feel it appropriate to highlight issues which could arise if voluntary joint arrangements were to be encouraged. The comments made by the Boundary Committee in the main section of their reports on Joint Arrangements are predicated on the belief that such arrangements will normally be between one local authority and other partners for the public or private sectors. Joint Archive arrangements would virtually by definition, need to involve a number of local authorities to provide sufficient resources and to more accurately reflect the braider geographical areas to which many of the records relate. This in turn requires funding arrangements which distribute the burden fairly between the partners, while also enabling necessary service developments to meet developing agendas such as Inspiring Learning, the preservation of electronic records, and workforce development. A common feature of the present set of joint arrangements has been the unwillingness of partner authorities to contribute to growth budgets for joint services, compared to services that they operate solely on their own behalf. This is an area which will need to be given specific attention if effective joint arrangements have to be developed as part of a move over to unitary authorities.

If elected regional assemblies are created following the referenda in the three regions, and these have enhanced roles with regard to culture and heritage, then we believe it would be timely to generate further debate about the most effective and sustainable model for archive service provision.

Yours sincerely

Nick Kingsley
Chairman, The National Council on Archives